Amar Seva Sangam - Sangamam School for Special Children – Site Visit

*Date: Friday, April 1st, 2016*

*Visited by: Shiva Paramasivan*

I visited the Amar Seva Sangam in Ayikudi near Tenkasi (Tamil Nadu) on 04/01/2016 during my personal visit to India. The intent of the trip is to learn how the Sangamam School for Special Children is doing and identify any specific needs for this year. Mrs. Meera Venkatesh introduced me to Mr. S.Sankar Raman, Hon Secretary of Amar Seva Sangam who connected me with his staff to fix up a time to meet the school staff and kids during my visit. Though I visited various facilities within the Amar Seva Sangam campus, I am expanding the details of my visit below to Sangamam School for Special Children.

On the day of visit I first met the P.R.O. who received me and walked me through the history of the Sangam and gave an overview of the Sangamam school. I met Mr. Sankarraman in the afternoon as he had gone to a nearby town in the morning. It was a privilege to meet Mr. Sankararaman as well and to talk to him about the Sangam. It was very exciting to learn about what they have accomplished since the beginning of this organization.

Sangamam is a daycare center/school for the mentally challenged and for children mainly suffering from cerebral palapsy. It was started in 1997 with just 9 children and 2 teachers. At the time of my visit, there were 79 students, who mostly are day scholars. There were 57 boys and 22 girls attended the school. In addition to that, 22 children which consist of 18 boys and 4 girls have been mainstreamed in general schools along with normal peers. The school has 7 special educators and 3 special educator asst, 2 speech trainers and 4 helpers.

The school facility includes 8 classrooms, a store room, an office room and a physiotherapy hall. Apart from these, a small play area is there in front of the Sangamam special school building which consists of a slide, a pair of swings and a parallel bar.

Though special children covers broad categories of Mentally Retarded, Cerebral Palsy and Autism affected, the “Special Needs” is a broad umbrella under which a staggering array of diagnoses can be fitted. The children are brought to school by their own bus. They are given free uniform, nutritious lunch, biscuits and milk. They are trained in daily living activities, behavioral science, self-care, basic reading, writing and vocational skills. Rehabilitation services like special education, physiotherapy, speech therapy and Yoga are also part of the curriculum to improve their health and intellectual ability.

The classes have been divided into primary, primary-1, secondary and pre-vocational classes based on the ability and age of children. On successful completion of these stages, the suitable children are mainstreamed in their own general school.

The P.R.O. explained how the teachers are evaluated and what they are looking for to support the infrastructure. Basically the teachers are evaluated on a 3-month evaluation cycle. Training opportunities are identified based on their performance. The school has well-trained teachers now who are devoted and passionate in training and taking care of these children. Most of the special educators have been with Sangamam for over 8 years or so. I had an opportunity to interact with all the teachers to learn how they teach and kids progress. The teachers were found very knowledgeable and found to be very affectionate with the students. The student to teacher’s ratio is roughly about 1:10 now. They are looking to hit 1:8 ratio. The school is looking for funds to support physical equipment, build class rooms and hire teachers etc. so that they can take more children than they can accommodate now.

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A bus from the Sangam goes to villages surrounding Ayikudy and Tenkasi and brings the mentally challenged to the school and drops them back at home in the evening daily. The children from ages around 5 to 20 are attending the school and are assessed throughout for their motor skills, communication, understanding of number, time and money concepts, domestic/social skills. They are then placed in different classes based on their mental abilities (mental age) and imparted training to take care of themselves and be independent to do their day-to-day activities. Some are given vocational training; some are trained in work that will help them to sustain themselves in their lives.

At Primary level focus is on developing their activities of daily living like grooming, bathing and toileting. Then basic conceptual developments in cognition along with language development and basic reading and writing skills are imparted. At secondary level, the focus is on training the children (10-14 yrs of age) in the area of reading, writing, language and arithmetic skills. Once they are ready to cope up with general curriculum, they are shifted to a suitable class in their high school where they continue studies with general students including physically challenged.

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| The Sangam also boasts a barrier free dining hall and a clean kitchen to serve tasty nutritious meals to the inmates of the Sangam and the children of its schools. The inmates, administrators, executives, students, teachers, patrons are served food in the common dining hall without bias. Women and volunteers from the nearby villages work in the kitchen to cook food and serve lovingly to the children. I had an opportunity to have my lunch along with the kids during my visit. |  |

Amar Seva Sangam is ably managed by Mr. Ramakrishnan, Mr. Sankararaman and their team. The magnitude of the services rendered by the Sangam is overwhelming and I felt very inspired hearing the stories of Mr. Ramakrishnan and Mr. Sankararaman. Mr. Ramakrishnan suffers of quadriplegia from an accident and Mr. Sankararaman has muscular dystrophy.

Amar Seva Sangam campus houses school for the handicapped, IGNOU center, computer center, notebook making and binding center, vocational training center, physiotherapy center etc. Overall, it was a pleasure to have met with great people, Mr. Ramakrishnan, Dr. S.Sumathy, teachers, staffs and all the lovely kids at Sangamam School for Special Children, Ayikudi. Amar Seva Sangam runs due to donations from generous and kind people. The Sangam is in need of our continuous support to sustain its present activities and to further expand their services. The Sangamam facility has to be expanded and equipment have to be acquired to meet the growing demands on the Sangam. The Sangam needs funds to provide basic needs of food, shelter and clothing to its inmates continuously. I can see and feel the need for continued support. I truly wish Mr. Ramakrishnan and the entire team good health and energy to pursue the noble cause that they have established.